The Story of Mount Rainier National Park

Establishment of Mount Rainier as the 5th National Park

The dominating presence of Mount Rainier as seen from downtown Seattle

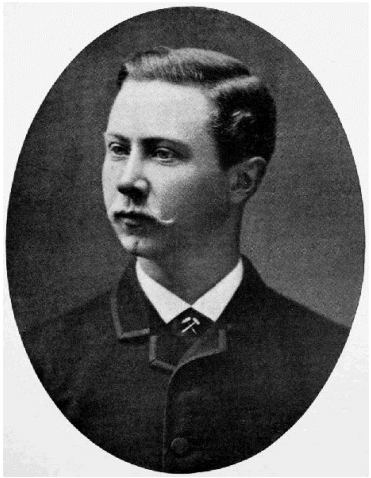
The rugged glacier clad mountain which dominates the eastern skyline from the Puget Sound metropolitan region became Mount Rainier National Park on March 2, 1899. The story of how it became a national treasure had as much to do with trees as it did tourism. It took the efforts of a very diverse group of people who lobbied Congress for six years before they succeeded.

The first national parks in America owe much of their development to investments made by the railroads. The railroads built hotels and spur lines to carry tourists to see the wonders in parks like Yellowstone and Glacier, but Rainier was different. Congress gave large land grants to the railroads in the late 1860's and 1870's to help finance building of transcontinental lines. In 1864 Congress gave the Northern Pacific Railroad (NPR) nearly 40 million acres which included about one half of Mount Rainier.

It didn't take the NPR long to realize they could make more money in land and trees than in carrying passengers. They convinced Congress to swap acre for acre unusable land, such as the ice and rock covering Mount Rainier, for fertile forest-covered land on the coastal plains.

The prominence of Mount Rainier attracted an assorted group of devotees, all of whom sought to protect it. Adventurist mountain climbers were the first. Successful climbers such as Hazard Stevens, P.B. Van Trump and Fay Fuller became public heroes because of their fearless exploits into the dangerous unknown. To the people in the Puget Sound area, Mount Rainier was "The Mountain" as if none other existed. Rainier symbolized the ultimate challenge for adventure and endurance.

For some the rugged beauty of the mountain beckoned them to come and bask in the revitalizing tranquility of the ever changing mountainscape while others were interested in profits they could make catering to them. James Longmire was one who typified a combination of these. After successfully climbing the peak in 1883, Longmire discovered a mineral spring meadow at the foot of the mountain. He filed a mineral claim for the land, constructed a small hotel and opened a health resort in 1890. He also constructed the first road into what is now the park and charged a toll to use it.



Bailey Willis (1883)

The most influential advocates for the park were a group of scientists and university professors. Mount Rainier's forests were some of the few remaining virgin timber stands in Western Washington. The scientists and teachers wanted them preserved as a laboratory for studying the flora and fauna in the varying climatic zones up the mountain. Additionally, having an active volcano so close to a growing population caused them concern for public safety but at the same time afforded an opportunity for studying the little understood dynamics of volcanism.

Bailey Willis, who spent considerable time on Rainier while employed by the NPR and then later the United States Geological Survey (USGS), was a leading figure in getting Mount Rainier recognized as a national park. Willis' accomplishments and connections made him a natural link between the varied groups. He was one of the earliest successful climbers of Rainier. He was an explorer, geologist and scientist, having done extensive mineral research and mapping of the glaciers on the mountain. He was also well acquainted with many of the people trying to encourage tourism to the mountain.

The first mention of establishing Mount Rainier as a national park was in 1883. That was the year the NPR finished their transcontinental line. The railroad realized they could greatly increase their profitability by having a destination tourist site at the end of their line. To promote their cause they assigned Bailey Willis to tour a group of European dignitaries around the mountain. They were so impressed that soon after their return to the East, they wrote to Henry Villard, President of the NPR.

However, publicity of the NPR's one-sided land swap with the government turned the public sentiment against them.

Ten years later, in 1893, efforts were renewed to petition Congress to establish the park. The impetus was President Benjamin Harrison's

proclamation of Rainier as the "Pacific Forest Reserve." Within a year Congress was presented with a formal request to establish the park. The proposal, written by Bailey Willis, was sent by the National Geographic Society. It spoke on behalf of not only the Society but also the USGS, the American Geological Society, the Universities of Michigan, Wisconsin and Washington, mountaineering clubs in Seattle and Tacoma, the Sierra Club and various business entities. Willis clearly laid out Mount Rainier's "many features of unique interest and wonderful grandeur, which fit it peculiarly to be a national park, forever set aside for the pleasure and instruction of the people." Willis skillfully tied together the varying interests for whom he was writing– tourism, science, recreation and education.

Letter to president of Northern Pacific Railroad from European dignitaries (1883): *"We have seen nothing more beautiful in Switzerland or Tyrol, in Norway or in the Pyrenees . . . The combination of ice scenery with woodland scenery of the grandest type is to be found nowhere in the Old World . . . We hope that the suggestion will at no distant date be made to Congress [that] Mount Rainier should . . . Be reserved by the Federal Government and treated as a national park.*

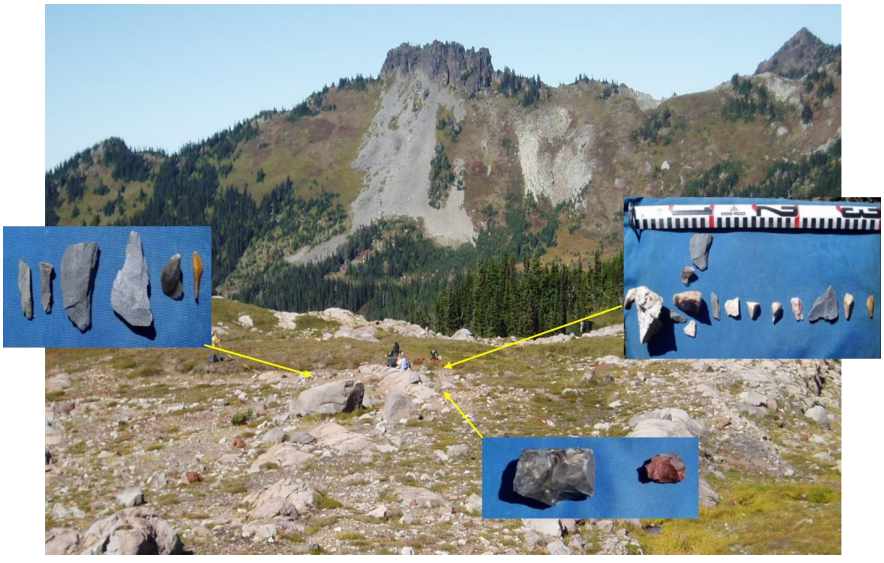
It took six Congresses before the bill establishing the park finally passed. One semantic issue which was debated was the need to distinguish between "preservation" and "conservation." The Pacific Forest Reserve was a conservation act. To conserve meant to manage the resources in such a way as to not deplete or misuse them, whereas preservation implied insuring that the resource remain unchanged by human intervention. One positive outcome of Rainier's Congressional saga was establishing the need for an agency to oversee preservation within the national parks.

Prehistoric human use of Mount Rainier

Until about 12,000 years ago much of the area which is now the park was covered by glacial ice. It took a few centuries after that before the mountain's subalpine slopes were able to support vegetation and animal life. There is substantial archaeological evidence that human populations began using mid to upper elevation landscapes on the mountain shortly after these places were capable of supporting productive plant and animal habitats. Presently, the oldest known sites on Mount Rainier indicate more than 9000 years of human connection with the mountain.

Aside from their seasonal hunting and gathering benefits, Native American people also regarded the Cascade volcanoes, and especially Rainier, as sacred places. Their folklore has a number of stories about the mountains, such as how they were formed, and on occasion, what happened to those who ventured too far toward the summit. In 1870, for example, Sluiskin, an Indian guide who led a small group of white men who intended to climb Rainier, warned them that an angry spirit lived in a lake of fire in the summit crater. Sluiskin guided them to a waterfall on the Paradise River which bears his name today but refused to lead them further.

At the beginning of the historic-period, people linked to at least six modern Native American tribes frequented Rainier: the Nisqually, the Cowlitz, the Squaxin, the Yakama, the Muckleshoot and the Puyallup. While people moved widely over the mountain landscapes, each group had their own traditional areas for hunting and gathering food, medicinal plants, and weaving materials. Many of the sites to which the ancestors of these people returned for thousands of years have been identified by the park's archaeologists.



Artifacts from an archeological site in a subalpine region on Mount Rainier

The 1854-5 treaties with local tribes established modern reservations, but reserved for them the right to continue traditional activities in places, like Rainier, where they had performed them in the past; so long as the areas remained open and unoccupied. Though such use was prohibited for many years, some of the park's resources now provide material, spiritual and cultural sustenance to the contemporary descendants of those that have used the mountain for millennia.

Naming the Mountain

Captain George Vancouver who sailed into Puget Sound in 1792 named the mountain. Since he was the first person to fix the

mountain with his navigational instruments and recorded the information in his ship's logs, custom allowed him to name the peak. He named it after Rear Admiral Peter Rainier, a friend who had fought against the Americans in the Revolutionary War. Peter Rainier never saw the mountain that bore his name.

Local native peoples had many names for the mountain. Most were some variation of Takhoma such as Tahobah, Tacob, Tacobet, Dahkobeed or more distantly, Puakcoke. The one thing the native population seemed to agree upon was the meaning that the mountain held for them, "the source of nourishment from the many streams coming from the slopes."

Admiral Peter Rainier (1741—1808)

For 50 years the mountain was called by two names, Tacoma and Rainier. On several occasions the city of Tacoma petitioned Congress to change the name from Rainier to Tacoma. Finally in 1924 a bill that changed the name to Mount Tacoma passed the US Senate but the House referred it to the Board on Geographic Names. Research by the board revealed the name "Takhoma" meant "a snowy peak" and not the unique name for the mountain. The board voted against the name change. It has not been contested since.

Early Climbers

We will never know for sure who the first people were who summited Mount Rainier. For the Native Americans of the area the mountain's upper slopes were a sacred place, not to be desecrated. Yet, there are legends in their lore of those who ventured up and what the consequences were.

A party of six led by Lieutenant August V. Kautz in 1857 made the first documented summit attempt. They attempted the glacial route that now bears Kautz's name and were *almost* successful. From Kautz's description of where he turned around, some think he got to the 14,000 ft. level.

The first successful climb for which there are reliable records was made by Hazard Stevens and Philemon B. Van Trump in 1870. They left their camp at 6 am on 17 August taking a route close to what is now called Gibraltar Ledges. Eleven hours later they reached the summit. That they survived is miraculous. They were forced to spend the night on the summit. Fortunately they found an ice cavern in the summit crater which was hollowed out by the many steam fumaroles within the crater.

Stevens and Van Trump were celebrated as conquering heroes when they returned to Tacoma. Their fame encouraged others to emulate their feat. Among other famous climbers in the pre-park days was John Muir (1888), pioneer ecologist, writer and founder of the Sierra Club; and Fay Fuller, the first woman to summit (1890). After the climb in a letter to his wife Muir wrote, "I didn't mean to climb it, but got excited and soon was on top."

Geology of Mountain Rainier

The volcanoes of the Cascade Range are the result of colliding tectonic plates. The Juan de Fuca plate, a small oceanic plate off the coast of Washington and Oregon, is sliding beneath the large North American Continental plate, a process called subduction. These plates are converging at the rate of 1 – 2 inches/year. As the oceanic plate subducts into the earth's mantle, great pressure and temperature builds. The subducting plate melts and the trapped water becomes superheated. All this causes the overlaying rocks to crack and allow the gasses and magma to rise some of which eventually breaks the surface making a volcano. This type of volcanism has been shaping the Cascades for the last 37 million years. The modern Cascade volcanoes however, are less than 1 million years old and are built upon the much older ones. Rainier has been building for 500,000 years on top of the 18 – 14 million year old Tatoosh Range which forms the southern border of the park.

Mount Rainier is still an active volcano. The most recent large scale activity was about 1,100 years ago. More recently, observers from various locations witnessed what they thought were volcanic events between 1820 and 1854 and again in 1894 but geologists have not found physical evidence to substantiate these claims.

The Cascades Volcano Observatory in Vancouver, Washington is continuously linked via telemetry to a network of seismometers that measure earthquake activity and to meters that detect any sliding or bulging due to rising magma.

At one time Rainier may have been as much as 2000 feet

How is "Rainier" pronounced?

John Landen Rainier, great grandson of Peter Rainier's elder brother (Peter never married), visited the park in 1935. He was the first member of the Rainier family to visit the mountain named for his ancestor. When asked how to pronounce his surname, he responded, "Rain-i-e-r, as in rainy – er weather."

Volcanologists are certain Mount Rainier will erupt again but no one knows when. They are confident however, that they will be able to predict a major volcanic event months before it happens.

taller. 5,600 years ago the top NE portion of the mountain collapsed, an event called the Osceola Mudflow. Debris from the mountain flowed as far as Auburn and Tacoma. Geologists determined that the collapse was due to the metamorphosis of rocks on the upper mountain. Water which percolated into the mountain became superheated and dissolved sulfuric compounds making sulfuric acid. Thousands of years of extreme temperature, pressure and exposure to this sulfuric acid, changed the hard rock to crumbly clay-like composition. A slight earthquake or the weight of the altered rock itself made it collapse. The same scenario has been repeated several times since the Osceola Mudflow. The latest was the Electron Mudflow about 500 years ago. That inundated the Orting valley. Today over 100,000 people live on the mudflow flood plains from Rainier's past.

The Park Today

Mount Rainier National Park is truly "an arctic island in a temperate sea" (Bailey Willis, 1894). The terrain climbs from the park entrances on the northwest and southeast sides over 12,500 feet to the summit, 14,411 feet. The glacier covered summit is surrounded by lush old growth conifer forests.

Mount Rainier is a destination recreation spot. The mountain presents a world class challenge to those who would like to experience technical glacial climbing. It has served as the training gym for many epic mountaineering expeditions. Jim Whitaker, first American to climb Mt. Everest, guided on Rainier years before his attempt on Everest. The whole American expedition of which he was a member trained here. Eric Simonson, leader of over 30 expeditions to the Himalayas, exclaimed "Thirty years of climbing and guiding at Mount Rainier taught me everything I needed to climb the world's highest mountains. It remains one of the finest training opportunities in the world for aspiring mountain climbers."

One doesn't need to aspire to conquer the peak to enjoy recreating in the park. There are 260 miles of trails in over 228,000 acres of wilderness. The Wonderland Trail is the premier trail within the park. It is a 93 mile loop around the mountain with 25,000 feet of elevation change.

Neither does one need to be a long distance trekker to enjoy the park. Floyd Schmoe, the first park naturalist (1924), was right when he claimed the park was probably better known for its beautiful subalpine meadows of wildflowers than it was for the mountain. Even the roads through the park were specially engineered to maximize views of the mountain.

The Longmire area is rich in mountain history and in picturesque buildings. Stephen Mather, first director of the National Park Service, felt strongly that, in a park where preserving the natural scenery was a primary purpose, the necessary buildings should not detract from that beauty but rather appear to belong to the setting. The massive log and glacial boulder buildings at Longmire epitomize Mather's ideal for structures within a park. Because of that, the buildings at Mount Rainier became the models for other parks to emulate. In 1997 much of Mount Rainier National Park was designated a National Historic Landmark District. A fun and educational activity is to take the Longmire Historical District Walking Tour. Ask for a brochure at the Museum to guide you on the walking tour.

The park's proximity to major metropolitan areas, along with ease of access to the many climatic zones as one ascends in elevation, makes it an ideal location for research. Some subject areas that scientists are currently studying include climate change, volcanology, glaciology, geohazards and plant phenology.

Subalpine meadow with Hellebore, Bistort, Paint Brush, and Lupine (Photo NPS/Steve Redman)

If you have questions about the park, the mountain or the trails, please visit the ranger's desk in any visitor center or talk to the ranger on duty at the Paradise Inn. You can also call 360-569-2211 for further information or visit the park's website: http://www.nps.gov/mora